

# CARS & PARTS<sup>®</sup>



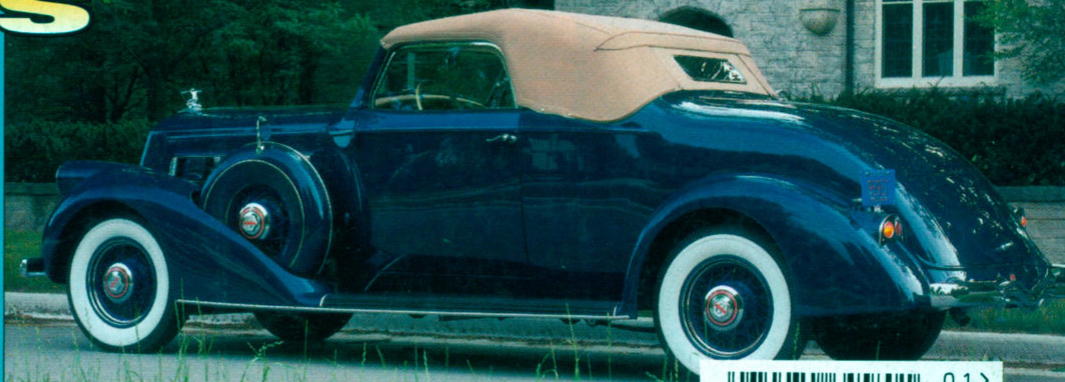
## '59 CHEVROLET *IMPALA*

## 1938 Pierce-Arrow

CONVERTIBLE COUPE

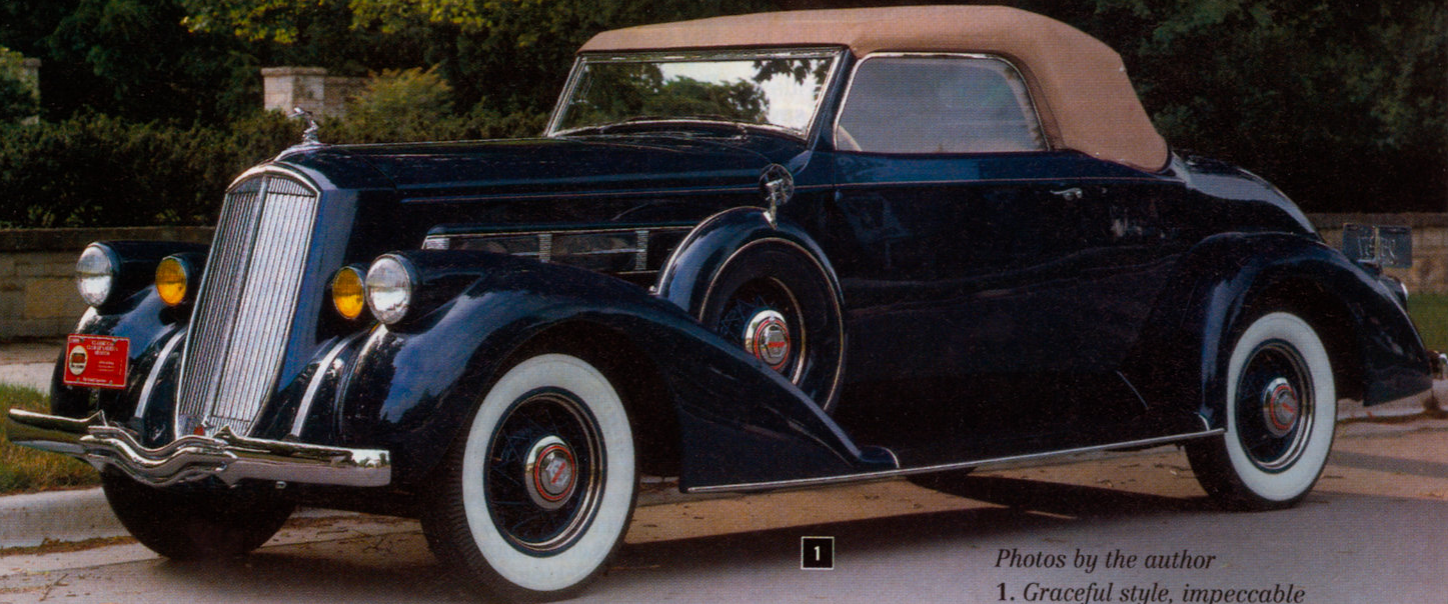
## '67 & '68 Pontiac GTOs

- Route 66 Tour:  
New Mexico &  
Texas
- T&C woodie resto:  
Installing a top
- Hershey 2000
- Chevrolet story:  
The nifty 'fifties



# 1938 Pierce-Arrow

## MODEL 1801 CONVERTIBLE COUPE



Photos by the author

1. Graceful style, impeccable craftsmanship, fine engineering, and sumptuous luxury: could the 1938 model be Pierce-Arrow's finest hour? It certainly was its last. Few had the privilege of owning a Pierce-Arrow, fewer still an open Pierce-Arrow.

## Save the Best For Last

by Thomas Glatch

From the tip of its famed "Archer" hood ornament to its flared-in tail-lights, the 1938 Pierce-Arrow Model 1801 Convertible Coupe is a magnificent automobile. With graceful style, impeccable craftsmanship, fine engineering, and sumptuous luxury, could this be Pierce-Arrow's finest hour?

Pierce-Arrow certainly had plenty of experience building luxury automobiles leading up to the 1938 model. Founded in 1865, Heintz, Pierce, and Munschauer of Buffalo, New York, began manufacturing a variety of household items, including bath tubs and bird cages. George Norman Pierce bought out his partners in 1872, reorganizing the firm under his own name. When the bicycling craze hit in the late 1800s, Pierce used its skill in manufacturing wire products to begin building bicycles. As with other manufacturers, the production of carriages or bicycles led to an interest in automobiles.

Beginning in 1900, George Pierce began building a few experimental



2. "The Archer" is one of the most recognizable automobile radiator ornaments.

"horseless carriages." Production of "motorettes" followed, and in 1904 the two-cylinder cars were given the Arrow name, with the first true automobiles also introduced that year, the four-cylinder Great Arrow. The Pierce Great Arrow won the Glidden Tour five straight years from 1905 through 1909 establishing its reputation as America's finest automobile in the most popular and respected competition of the era.

Things were already humming in the factory at 1695 Elmwood Avenue in Buffalo when President William Howard

Taft ordered two Pierce-Arrows in 1909 for White House use. This was the first time an American President used an automobile for official functions, and Pierce's reputation was even more solidified. These were very expensive cars for the time, ranging from \$6,500 to \$7,750, but a year's production was often sold even before the first cars were assembled. Over the years, many more heads of state purchased Pierce-Arrows, including Emperor Hirohito of Japan, King Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia, and the Shah of Persia.

Prominent businessmen included A. Atwater Kent of Atwater Kent Mfg. Co., John L. McMillan of the McMillan Book Company, C.W. Post of Post Cereals, John Ringling of Ringling Bros. Circus, Mrs. Sarah Winchester, heiress to the Winchester Rifle fortune, and Mrs. F.W. and Charles S. Woolworth of F.W. Woolworth & Co.

Some of the Hollywood stars that brought fame to the Pierce-Arrow included Tom Mix, Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, and Ginger Rogers. Senators, congressmen, Supreme Court justices and mayors all bought America's finest. Even Ransom E. Olds owned a Pierce-Arrow in his days after leaving Oldsmobile.

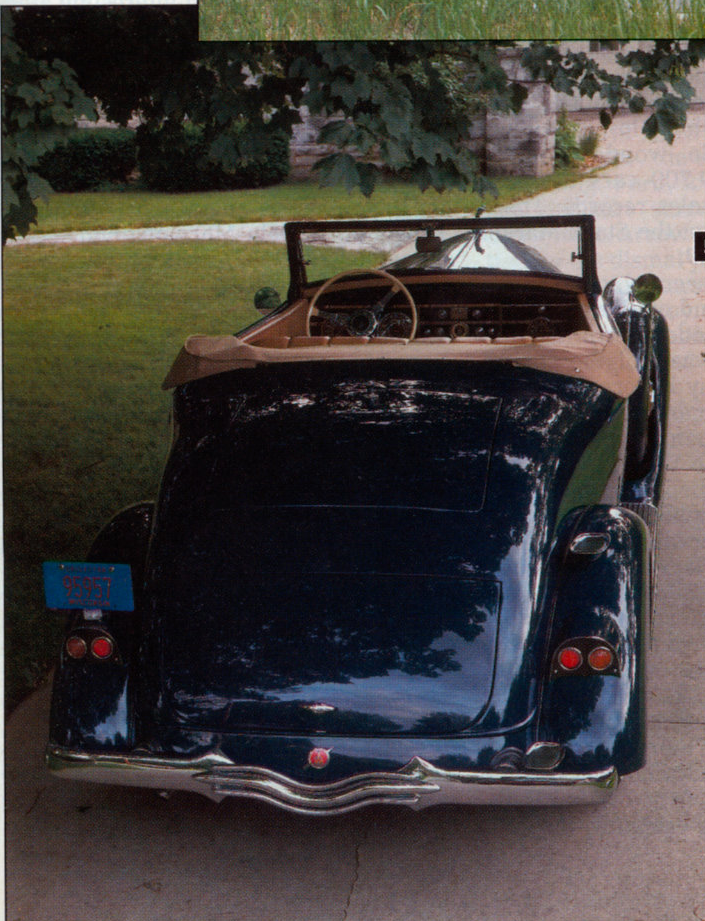
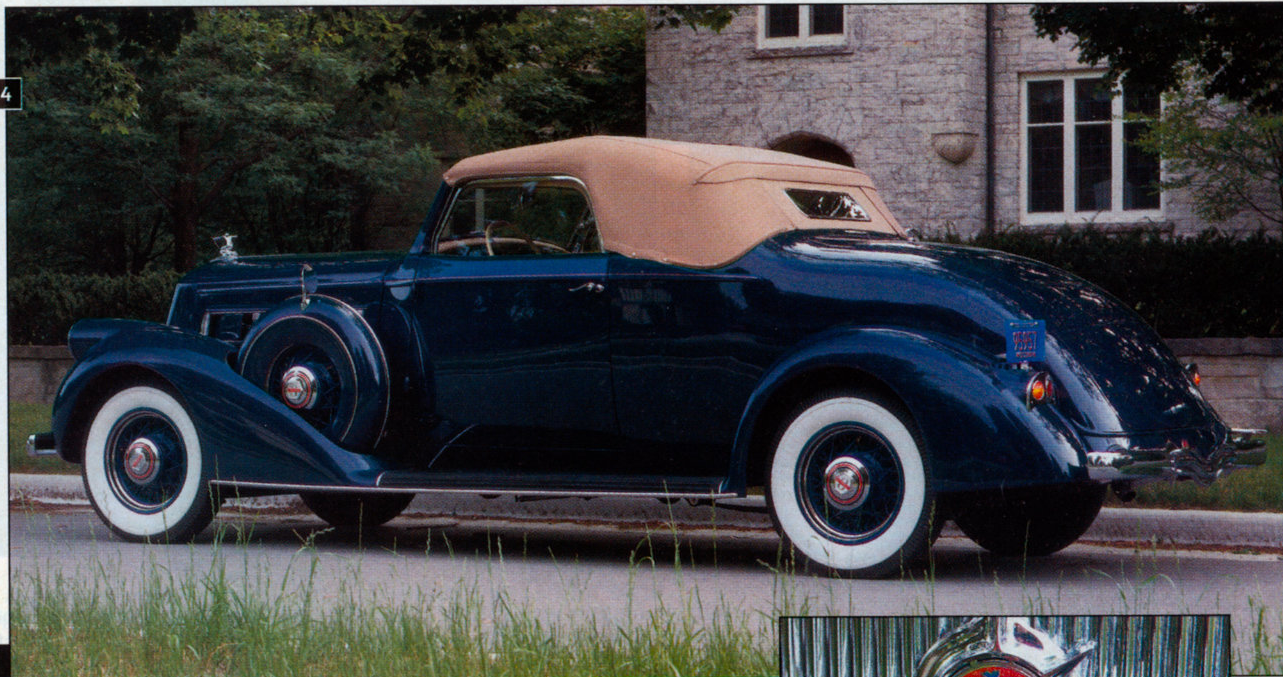
The Pierce family left the automobile business in 1908, with George Pierce retiring and son Percy managing the

bicycle operation for a while. The firm was renamed the Pierce-Arrow Motor Car Company with George Birge taking the reigns. In 1913, Herbert M. Dawley designed and patented the famous flared-in fender-mounted headlamps that would soon become a Pierce-Arrow trademark. Although technically an option until becoming standard equipment in 1932 (they weren't legal in all states before then), the graceful headlamps were ordered on most cars, and became a symbol of true automotive luxury. Other innovations added during the



3. Herbert M. Dawley designed and patented the famous fender-mounted headlamps in 1913. The final version of these lights, found on the 1936-38 models, were very bullet-like. The foglights inset neatly between the grille and headlamps.

4. The Pierce-Arrow was photographed in front of the home built in 1936-37 by B.C. Ziegler, founder of the brokerage and investment firm of the same name. While it is not known if Ziegler owned a Pierce-Arrow, he is just the kind of community leader to own such an exclusive automobile. The West Bend, Wisconsin, home is now owned by Dr. Mark O'Meara.



5. Our feature car, owned by John Dedrick of West Bend, Wisconsin, is believed to be the last convertible ever built by Pierce-Arrow, but also being the first eight-cylinder model off the abbreviated 1938 assembly line that stopped in December of 1937. Just 18 eight-cylinder Pierce-Arrows were built before the firm folded.

'teens included electric starters beginning in 1914 (introduced on Cadillac in 1912) and a pressurized fuel system in 1915. The company offered three models during that decade, including the huge 66-A-1 with a 147.5-inch wheelbase and an 824-cid six-cylinder engine, the largest powerplant ever in an American car. Profits at Pierce-Arrow were over \$4 million annually, and in 1916 the company sold \$10.7 million in stock.

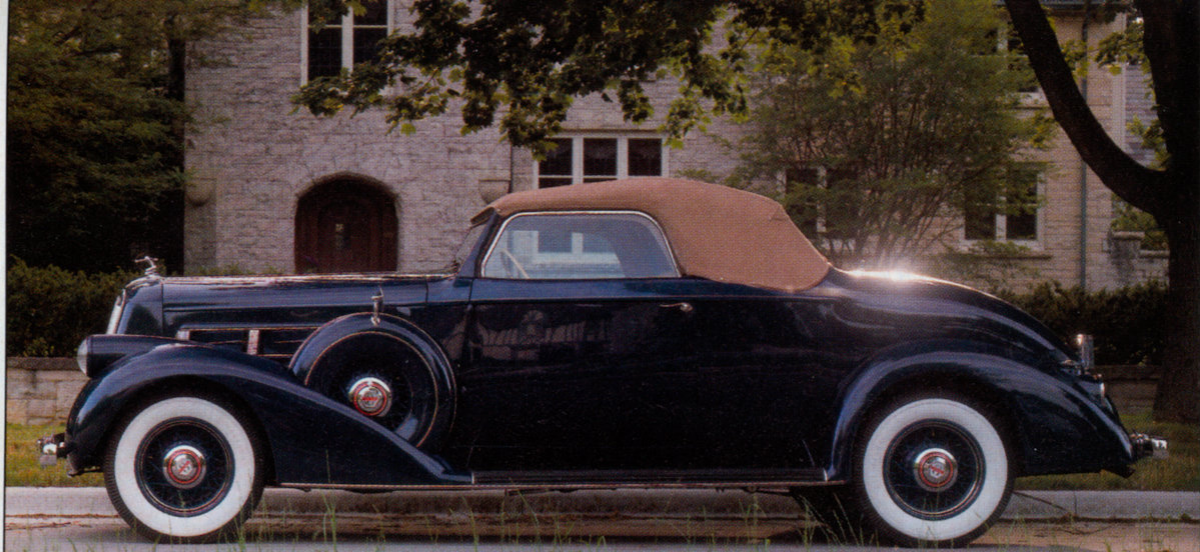
Up through the 1920s, Pierce-Arrow continued its reputation as America's finest luxury car, despite stiff competition from Cadillac, Lincoln, Marmon, Kissel, Locomobile, Duesenberg, the US-



6. The Pierce crest is mounted over the crank-hole cover on the lower level of the radiator grille. The crest is not of the automaking Pierce family, unfortunately. This error was perpetuated over the years, much to the chagrin of the Pierce family.

built Rolls-Royce, and others. Along with Packard and Peerless, Pierce-Arrow comprised what was called the "Three P's" of automobile luxury. The quality of Pierce-Arrows was impeccable. Engines, for example, were assembled, run in, disassembled, inspected, then reassembled for more testing. Engines and bodies also made extensive use of aluminum. But it was not until 1920 that Pierce-Arrow finally moved the steering wheel from the right-side, dating back to the horseless carriage era, to what was now the standard, the left side.

7. Originally painted creme, the stately Pierce-Arrow is now painted a more luxurious "Lombardo Blue" with a contrasting tan top and leather interior. A paradox of modern and traditional, the 1938 Pierce-Arrow Convertible Coupe is the essence of classic elegance.



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8. Rumble seats were going out of favor by 1938. It was about the last year for the auxiliary seat industry wide, however there were a few makers still offering them in 1939.

9. The small compartment behind the passenger door is commonly referred to as the "golf bag compartment."



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A decade later, Pierce-Arrow was again being accused of being slow to change. Perhaps it was the isolation of operating out of Buffalo and not the Motor City. Perhaps it was a company mired in tradition. Or perhaps it was just plain arrogance from believing they could do no wrong. Whatever the reason, change was in store for Pierce-Arrow.

As the Roaring Twenties came to a close, Pierce-Arrow had to have been confident of the future. In 1928, Studebaker purchased \$5.7 million worth of Pierce-Arrow stock in a move that was sure to strengthen both firms. Both companies remained separate in terms of engineering and manufacturing operations, but now Pierce-Arrow had Studebaker's capital to use, and Studebaker moved into fourth in automobile production behind General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler. Pierce-Arrows were now sold through Studebaker dealers, greatly increasing the availability of these fine cars.

Major changes came to the Pierce-Arrow line in 1929. The venerable six-

cylinder engine was retired, replaced by a modern straight eight. Two wheelbase lengths were offered, 133 inches and 143 inches, with a total of 19 different body styles available among both models. Compared to the old cars, the new Pierce-Arrows were long, low, and thoroughly modern. No wonder Pierce-Arrow sold about 9,700 cars in 1929, smashing all of its sales records. There was just one problem: the Stock Market crash in October 1929.

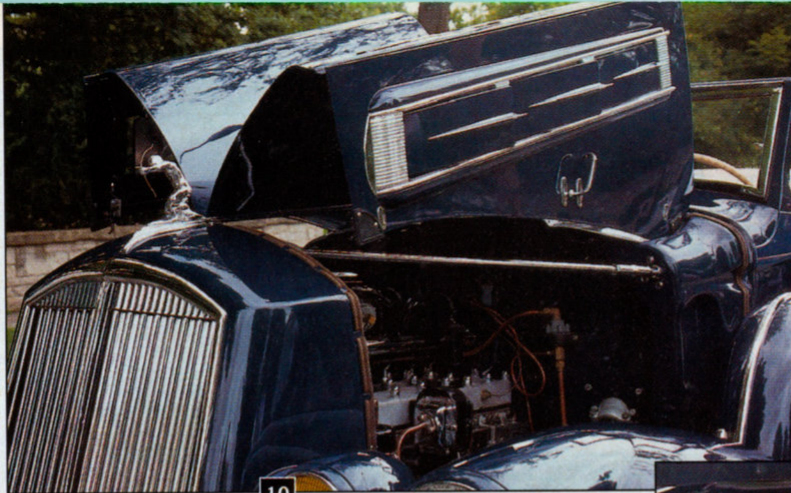
At first, the crash seemed to have little effect on America, and on Pierce-Arrow. Sales of the 1930 models were down to 6,795 cars, but it was still the second best year in company history. Then the Great Depression began to take hold. In the United States, unemployment ran at 25 percent, but since the economy was still very agrarian, unemployment in the cities ran much higher. Times were tough even for those who had jobs. For example, this author's grandfather was a firefighter in a major city, yet he was often paid in "scrip" rather than real money when the city could not make its payroll. Some people of great means retained their wealth, or actually profited during the Depression, yet because of the suffering around them, chose not to own ostentatious automobiles like a Pierce-Arrow.

Despite the souring economy, the auto

industry remained optimistic. In 1932 alone, some of the most interesting automobiles in history were introduced. Ford brought V-8 power to the mass market for the first time, while Plymouth and Chevrolet offered great style and six cylinders to counter. In the luxury car market, multi-cylinder madness took hold, with Cadillac introducing its mighty V-16 and V-12 engines in 1930 and 1931, respectively. Marmon and Peerless responded with V-16s of their own, while Packard and Lincoln brought out V-12s. Not to be outdone, Pierce-Arrow also offered an excellent side-valve V-12 beginning in 1932. So good was this engine, a version of it continued to power Seagrave fire engines well into the 1970s.

In 1933, a new U.S. President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, was sworn in, and a whole feeling of optimism seemed to permeate the nation. With nothing to fear but fear itself, automakers built some of the most spectacular cars ever seen. Packard displayed its Dietrich-bodied "Car of the Dome" sedan and Cadillac showed its Aerodynamic V-16 special at the Century of Progress Exposition at the Chicago World's Fair. But Pierce-Arrow went one better at the same event, with the ultra-modern Silver Arrow. Powered by the new 175-hp V-12 and packed with luxurious appoint-

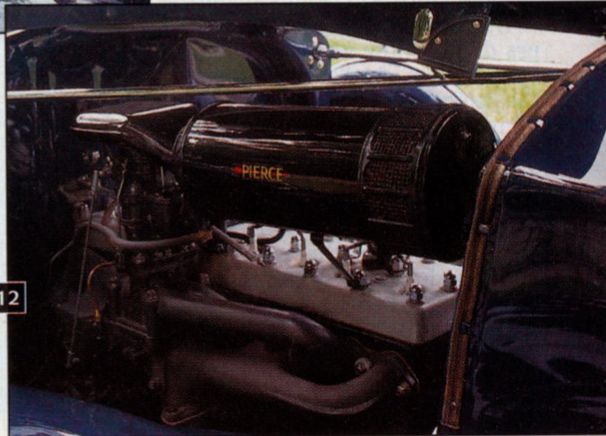
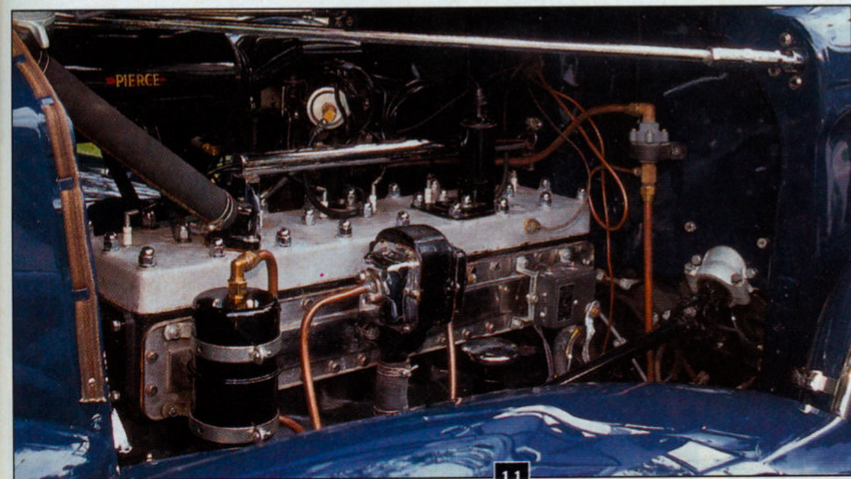
10. In true "winged" fashion, both sides of the hood could be opened at the same time. The auto industry was quickly moving toward one-piece hoods in the years to follow. In fact, Cord, Chrysler and Lincoln had already started using the "alligator-type" hoods.



#### About the club

Contact the Pierce-Arrow Society for membership information at P.O. Box 36637, Richmond, VA 23235-8013. Dues are \$25 per year - \$37 for first class postage - which includes the quarterly publication *The Arrow*; [www.pierce-arrow.org](http://www.pierce-arrow.org)

Note: Special thanks to Bernie Weis of the Pierce-Arrow Society for assistance with this story.



12. Pierce-Arrow engines were assembled, run in, disassembled, inspected, then reassembled for more testing. The Pierce logo on the air-cleaner is similar to that found on the Pierce bicycles.

11. The 385-cid Pierce-Arrow straight-eight produced a silent 150 hp.

12. Pierce-Arrow engines were assembled, run in, disassembled, inspected, then reassembled for more testing. The Pierce logo on the air-cleaner is similar to that found on the Pierce bicycles.

ments, the sleek, aerodynamic, 115-mph \$10,000 Silver Arrow was a sign that Pierce-Arrow intended to stay at the top of the luxury market. Only five Silver Arrows were sold, but Pierce-Arrow had made a statement.

Yet all was not well. In 1933, Studebaker declared bankruptcy and sold Pierce-Arrow for \$1 million to a group of Buffalo investors. Around the same time, Peerless and Marmon, two of Pierce-Arrow's main competitors, folded. So did Kissel and Locomobile. The Big Three produced about a fourth of the cars they did in 1929. And in 1933, Pierce-Arrow lost \$3 million selling just 2,295 cars.

While hardly a sales smash, elements of the Silver Arrow's sleek look were adapted to the 1934 Pierce Arrow line. A lower-cost model was added, the 836A, with a 136-inch wheelbase and a smaller 366-cid straight eight. Prices ranged from \$2,795 for the 836A, to \$4,495 for the top-of-the-line model 1248 Custom V-12. Sales, however, plunged to 1,535 cars in 1934. The model line was similar in 1935, when President Franklin Roosevelt ordered two Pierce-Arrows for the White House, but this time the esteem of presidential purchase did nothing for the company - production plummeted to just 780 cars.

Undaunted, Pierce-Arrow debuted much-improved cars for 1936. Still pow-

ered by either the 150-hp eight or the 175-hp V-12, the rounder, more-modern cars had more than 40 improvements. Sales perked up to 905, but that was still far below the 3,000 annual sales needed to turn a profit.

While FDR's optimistic campaign song, "Happy Days Are Here Again," had not yet come true, the economy in 1937 was improving. Ford, for example, produced 848,608 cars versus 287,285 in 1932. But Pierce-Arrow sold far fewer cars than in the dismal year of 1936 - just 191 - and the investors that were needed to keep the company afloat dried up. Over in Auburn, Indiana, Auburn-Cord-Duesenberg folded forever in October of '37.

Still, when the first 1938 Pierce-Arrow model 1801 eight-cylinder car was built in the fall of 1937, our feature car, there may have been an air of optimism in Buffalo. There was no such thing as an ordinary Pierce-Arrow, but this one was special - a convertible coupe built on a 139-inch wheelbase chassis. Painted either cream or tan, the result was stunning to say the least. While documentation from that period is sketchy, it is thought this car was built for the auto show circuit to display Pierce-Arrow at its finest.

After spending 35 years in storage, the Pierce-Arrow was bought by John Dedrick of West Bend, Wis. in 1997. The

car's restoration was finished in 1999. Because of its long hibernation and emerging in completely unrestored condition, the restoration accurately followed original patterns, although Dedrick chose the rich "Lombardo Blue" paint over the original color. It is driven regularly, even to shows, and earned a score of 98.5 points in Classic Car Club of America judging at Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, in July 2000. Not bad for a car that endured a two-hour thunderstorm while being driven to the event.

Powering Dedrick's Pierce-Arrow is the 385-cid, 150-hp straight eight. First used in 1929, the engine was continually improved, with hydraulic valve lifters being added in 1933, making Pierce the first automaker to do so. The three-speed manual transmission has overdrive and free-wheeling to aid fuel economy and performance. Smooth and quiet, "this car will cruise at 65 mph, and stops amazingly well thanks to the vacuum assisted brakes," says Dedrick.

The stylish convertible coupe body is classic elegance at its finest, designed and built by Pierce-Arrow's in-house coachcrafters. The 1938 models were little changed from the cars introduced in 1936, and Dedrick's car continues the theme of Pierce-Arrow's traditional fender-mounted headlights accompanied by two inner lights flanking the grille, although the inner lamps became fog

lights on the '38 models. In back, the dual taillights are flared into each fender, echoing the headlights. The rich tan leather interior is dominated by a beautiful Art Deco instrument panel. Despite the many mechanical advances on the 1938 models, the Pierce-Arrow is steeped in tradition. There are twin side-mounted spare tires in the front fenders, and behind the passenger compartment is a rumble seat – with an extra small door on the side commonly referred to as a “golf bag door” – all design elements that were popular in the late '20s and early '30s, but becoming out-of-date compared to cars like the Chrysler Airflow, Cord 812, and Lincoln-Zephyr.

What the Buffalo assembly line workers didn't know was that the first eight-cylinder car of 1938 was also most likely the last convertible ever built by the company. It is also doubtful that this 1938 Pierce-Arrow ever sat on an auto show display. Pierce-Arrow Co. declared bankruptcy in December of 1937, and the company built only about 18 eight-cylinder cars and another 22 V-12s for the 1938 model year. The company's assets and equipment were auctioned the next spring, and the doors at 1695 Elmwood Avenue closed forever on May 13, 1938 – a Friday!

## SPECIFICATIONS 1938 PIERCE-ARROW MODEL 1801

### GENERAL DATA

Body style: Convertible  
Coupe w/rumble seat  
Passenger capacity: 3/5  
Factory price: \$3,460

### BASIC SPECIFICATIONS

Wheelbase: 139"  
Length: 216"  
Weight: 5,590 lbs.  
Front tread: 59.13"  
Rear tread: 61.5"  
Ground clearance: 7"

### INTERIOR SPECIFICATIONS

Headroom: 37"  
Legroom: 38"  
Hip room: 54"  
Shoulder room: 55"

### ENGINE

Type: Straight eight  
Displacement: 385 cu. in.  
HP @ RPM: 150 @ 3,400  
Compression ratio: 6.4:1  
Bore x stroke: 3.5 x 5"  
Induction system:  
Stromberg EE3 1.5"  
dual downdraft  
carburetor

Ignition system: Delco-

Remy 6 volt

Fuel: Regular

Exhaust: Buffao 2.63"  
single pipe

Valve configuration:

L-head

Main bearings: 7

### TRANSMISSION

Type: Warner 3-spd.  
manual with overdrive  
and free wheeling,  
synchromesh helical  
gears

Ratios:

1st – 2.70

2nd – 1.63

3rd – 1.00

Overdrive – 0.71

Reverse – 3.24

### DIFFERENTIAL

Type: Hypoid semi-floating  
Ratio: 4.58

### SUSPENSION

Front: I-beam, reverse  
elliott axle, leaf springs,  
friction shock absorbers  
Rear: Semi-floating axle,

leaf springs, friction  
shock absorbers

### FRAME

Type: Ladder

### STEERING

Type: Ross

Ratio: 20:1

Turning circle: 23.25'

Turns, lock to lock: 3.75

### BRAKES

Make: Stewart

Front/rear: Mechanical

16" drum with vacuum  
assist

Effective swept area: 342"

### TIRES

Size: 7.00 x 17"

Type: 6-ply

### CAPACITIES

Cooling system: 7 gals.

Gasoline tank: 30 gals.

Engine oil: 9 qts.

Rear axle: 6 lbs.

### CALCULATED DATA

HP/CID: 0.39

LBS/HP: 39.33

LBS/CID: 15.06



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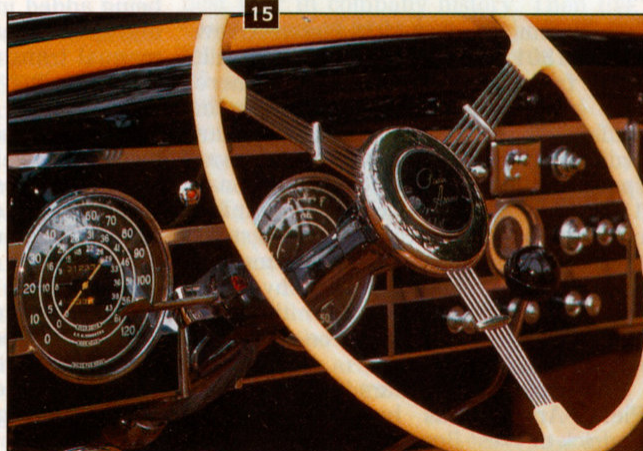
13. The interior is awash with rich supple tan leather and complements the dark blue exterior nicely. The “banjo” steering wheel spokes are bound together by the elegant creme-colored plastic.



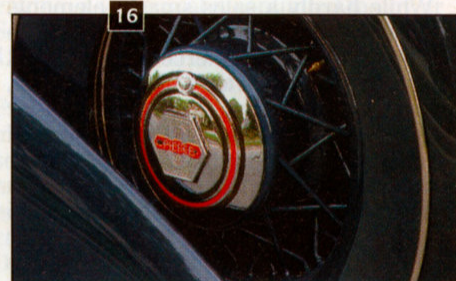
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14. The black-and-chrome instrument panel, with a full complement of gauges, is a wonder of Art Deco design. Not exactly a dashboard Ralph Nader would be fond of, but certainly elegant in execution.

15. The horn button has the Pierce-Arrow name elegantly emblazoned in the center. The unique combination 120-mph speedometer and tachometer (left) issues the miles per hour on the outer ring, and tells you the rpm on the inner two rings – the middle for high gear (6,100 rpm) and the inside for overdrive (4,300 rpm).



15



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16. Pierce-Arrow clung to traditions, as with these dual side-mounted spare tires, even though few cars were still equipped with them by 1938. Note the unique locking hubcap. The wire wheels were made by Kelsey-Hayes.